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UNCLAS NASSAU 000350

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STATE FOR WHA/CAR WBENT

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: FAVORABLE WEATHER BRINGS SECOND HAITIAN MIGRATION
SURGE IN FOUR MONTHS

REF: 05 NASSAU 1996

1. (U) The Royal Bahamas Defense Force (RBDF) and Bahamian immigration officials intercepted 568 Haitian migrants in eight separate February interdictions. All but 39 were discovered in the Bahamas' Exuma Islands in the Central Bahamas, several days journey from Haiti and well north of the Windward Passage where most are typically intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard. All but 41 of the migrants were taken between February 20-23.

2. (U) This surge created pressure on an already overcrowded Carmichael Road Immigrant Detention Center, which held more than 800 migrants on February 22 despite a stated maximum capacity of only 500. To ease crowding, the Ministry of Housing erected temporary housing while immigration officials worked to quickly repatriate over 600 migrants in a three day period from February 22-25.

3. (U) While Deputy Prime Minister Pratt expressed concern regarding the timing of the surge in the aftermath of Haitian elections on February 7, The Bahamas Department of Immigration, RBDF, the Haitian embassy and the U.S. Coast Guard have each suggested that the surge was likely caused by favorable weather conditions, including southeasterly winds, rather than political conditions in Haiti. Supporting that assessment, high seas beginning February 25 have halted the surge, at least temporarily.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: Coming in the midst of the ongoing controversy over two Cuban migrants, there has been unfounded public speculation that the U.S. Coast Guard has scaled back its patrols of the migrant routes to register displeasure with the Bahamian Government. In fact, there was a similar surge of 656 interdictions in November 2005 during a similar period of favorable sea conditions (reftel). Neither surge approaches the levels of the early 1990's, but on both occasions, a relatively commonplace event -- good weather -- completely overwhelmed the detention center's capacity and necessitated the use of temporary measures to house the refugees. We continue to encourage The Bahamas to improve capacity at the Detention Center to better meet the humanitarian needs of migrants, especially during these regular surges in migration. END COMMENT.
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